

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 517

CS 510 804

AUTHOR Riddles, Allison
TITLE A Musical Color Line: The Problem of Race in White Rap Rhetoric.
PUB DATE 2002-03-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (53rd, Chicago, IL, March 20-23, 2002).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Context; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Popular Music
IDENTIFIERS Ohio University; *Rap Music; *Rhetorical Stance

ABSTRACT

An instructor of freshman composition at Ohio University always teaches a section on music in her courses because freshmen jump at the chance to discuss a part of their youth culture that they readily identify with. The problem, however, has been how to incorporate rap music successfully into these discussions with a classroom full of white students. A viable solution presented itself with the rise of white rappers like Eminem and Kid Rock. The appeal of rap music has always been the feelings of alienation presented in the unabashedly angry lyrics, and now that white rappers are expressing the same feelings of angst and rage as black rappers, a whole new fan base has been created. This paper discusses in detail some of the lyrics and attitudes of Kid Rock and Eminem. The paper states that rap has many ethnic groups represented, including Latinos, African Americans, and now Caucasians. It finds that students in the composition class, through extensive discussions on rap and race, recognized that being white is a specific ethnic identity instead of just the norm or the typical majority. (NKA)

A Musical Color Line: The Problem of Race in White Rap Rhetoric

Allison Riddles

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Allison Riddles

CCCCs Paper

March 15, 2002

A Musical Color Line: The Problem of Race in White Rap Rhetoric

At Ohio University, the title of the freshmen English course is Freshmen Composition: Writing and Rhetoric. I have taught a section on music in every freshmen composition course I've had for one primary reason: the music genre contains many controversial views on political issues such as race and gender, and freshmen jump at the chance to discuss a part of their youth culture that they readily identify with. Most eighteen and nineteen year olds identify themselves by the music they listen to. Music is very important to them in general, and being able to discuss it on a critical level only enhances their understanding of the messages and ideas being presented to them. The problem, however, has been how to incorporate rap music successfully into these discussions with a classroom full of white kids. I chose rap music specifically because of its controversial status within the music industry, and the way in which this oral form of rhetoric is presented. The long outdated view that rap music only represents the voice of the inner-city ghettos still creates tension. A great number of my students enjoy rap music, but are hesitant to explain why, for fear of appearing like an illegitimate fan. There is also the conflict of interest for these students trying to shed their pre-instilled

notions of African-Americans. They can like black music, but this doesn't necessarily mean they like or even respect the black community.

I struggled as an instructor to find that bridge between hip hop culture and the racial autonomy of my students. A viable solution presented itself with the rise of white rappers like Eminem and Kid Rock. These guys were rapping about some of the same issues as their black predecessors, but this time white suburban kids were paying attention and claiming this hybrid music as their own. The popularity of rock 'n rap has made it increasingly easier to introduce this particular music category as the impetus of class discussion. The appeal of rap music for any race or gender has always been the feelings of alienation presented in the unabashedly angry lyrics, and now that white rappers were expressing the same feelings of angst and rage, a whole new fan base was created.

At first glance, this may appear like another example of appropriation or the white people barging in and taking over or colonizing this black industry, but this is definitely not the case. Yes, white individuals have joined this music genre, but it is still a black dominated field. For example, Dr. Dre (a black rapper and pioneer in rap) not only discovered Eminem, but also engineers and produces all of his albums thus far.

A line from the Kid Rock song, *Cowboy*, illustrates a nexus between racial boundaries. "I'm not straight out of Compton, I'm straight out the trailer." Kid Rock didn't really grow up in a trailer park, but he says he invokes white-trash imagery to connect "white kids with their whiteness." He has taken this music category and fashioned a white ethnic identity to this black dominated medium to let white kids know that it's okay to like hip-hop. Now, instead of shyly asserting that they do like rap music, my students were able to voice their favorable opinions on rap due to their new found

feelings of belonging in this genre. White rappers have become icons to cling to in order to represent the white fan base that listens to rap music. I could now bring up the problems of violence and race to my class from the white perspective and get their enthusiastic views, instead of a tense, sparse discussion, stymied by feelings of lack of authority due to differing racial origins.

Violence has always been the reason for looking down on rap music. Rap artists' lyrics are full of gun and murder references, particularly in the sub category of gangsta rap. What critics fail to mention is that these guys are generally writing about what they know, telling tales of gritty life in the mean streets of every major city in America. These rappers aren't making up things in order to shock their listeners—they are rapping to create an awareness, and to also express their feelings through music. The theme of violence is also apparent in white rap as well. Eminem may not rap about killing rival gang members or shooting someone who stole his car, but, instead, creates a new pathological trend. In one song, he raps about driving around with his daughter with the dead body of his wife in the trunk. Gangsta rap material? No. Violent depiction of a possible scenario? Absolutely. This particular lyric generated great discussion in my class. There is no way to defend this idea of carting around your wife's dead body with your young child present. My students began to discuss the problems and issues created by lyrics such as these with a confidence in their material, and a new authority that allowed them to analyze things critically.

The other example of Eminem's unfavorable lyrics has to do with homophobia and gay bashing. Sexuality is a sensitive subject to discuss from the start, but to begin with Eminem's lyric, "My words are like a jagged edge/ That'll stab you in the head

whether you're a fag or lez," proved a great beginning to my class discussion. This lyric created such revulsion and controversy in the gay community that many supporters protested Eminem's four Grammy nominations, one of which was for album of the year, at the 2001 awards show. This of course presented great debate over the freedom of speech issue, and led to an uninhibited discussion of gay lifestyles and problems created over dealing with homosexuals in everyday life. After much introspection and discussion, perhaps one of my favorite student quotes arose from the discourse. Finally, after much debate over whether or not being gay was wrong, or if it created problems for my students personally, a female student of mine said quite matter-of-factly, "Sex is sex as long as it's not with a four year old. Who cares if your gay or straight?" This in turn, provided a great twist on the age old belief that all homosexuals are deviants and perverts, acting on unnatural sexual urges. I witnessed some of my most staunch anti-gay advocates think about this, and some of them even admitted that they couldn't defend their beliefs or give any credible evidence as to why they didn't like homosexuals. A light bulb had been switched on, and the narrow-minded tone to their argument became evident. A good number of these students began to change their tune, and were able to begin discussing homosexuality in more neutral, and less hate-oriented rhetoric.

Another great example of Eminem's continuing controversy over his views on homosexuals was his performance at the Grammys with openly gay entertainer, Elton John. My students had a great deal to say about this, but most surprising was their feelings of responsibility for his representation on national television. Because they identified with this artist on a racial level, they somehow felt that he was depicting the views of all white people. They didn't see a need for such a grandiose display of

seemingly okay relations with a gay man, even though the rapper continues to spout gay bashing lyrics. They thought it was embarrassing and a joke. Their once favorable opinions of this white rapper were beginning to be clouded with mixed feelings of misrepresentation and unnecessary jabs at a minority that did nothing to invite such scrutiny in the first place. My students had a hard time reconciling Eminem's fame and popularity with the reality of his rhetoric.

Kid Rock defines his rhetoric as "hick-hop", and perhaps takes a more gentle approach to associating rap with white culture. However, he does tackle issues such as race, but in more positive tones. His song, *Black Chick, White Guy* tells the tale of an interracial relationship, and the hardships this couple must face. "Black chick, white guy. Does it mean shit? Maybe/ I don't know, but yo, it never fazed me." He goes on to describe the hardships this couple faces when the girl gets pregnant. While this could be a pretty generic example of teen pregnancy, he adds the complicated twist of making it an interracial couple, forcing his fans to look at the issue, too. This topic was easier to present to my class than sexuality, and there didn't seem to be a lot of negativity when opinions were expressed. They seemed to accept it as part of society, and didn't have a hard time taking the example from a white rapper. Many of my students really liked this song because of its realistic portrayal of teen pregnancy and the effects, and the racial identity of the couple didn't seem to influence them one way or another.

These rappers are doing exactly what rappers have been doing since the hip-hop movement started: they're writing what they know. If Eminem hates gay people, he writes about it. If he feels anger toward his estranged wife, he writes about killing her. He also writes about being raised by a single mother on welfare in Detroit, being beaten

up repeatedly in school, and trying to numb his emotional pain with alcohol and drugs. This is what he knows. By re-creating his feelings of alienation, rage, and pain Eminem is creating agency for white kids to claim their listener status in the rap genre. Rap has many ethnic groups represented including Latinos, African-Americans, and now Caucasians. This expanding cultural growth only adds to the positive reputation of rap. Being able to identify with the feelings of someone famous, especially someone of your same ethnic status, makes the music that these artists create even more important to their various groups of listeners, no matter what racial category they fall into. As an instructor, it has proven beneficial for me to be able to flip the traditional approach to discussing things like race, and use an African-American dominated field, with white participants as the examples. This creates an unusual looking glass from which to gaze through, and the results are more than satisfactory. Students begin to examine white rap rhetoric from a critical perspective, and learn more about themselves, and what they really believe, as opposed to stereotypes and vague concepts put forth by such influences as their parents and society. My students, through our extensive discussions on rap and race, recognized that being white is a specific ethnic identity instead of just the norm or the typical majority. Hopefully, by realizing that we are all just pieces to the larger ethnic puzzle, and that each piece represents its racial identity, more of my students will want to work with these other pieces in order to see the complete picture.



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Signature: <i>Allison Riddles</i>	Printed Name/Position/Title: Allison Riddles, Graduate Teaching Associate
Organization/Address: Ohio University Ellis Hall Athens, OH 45701	Telephone: (740) 593-2743 Fax: email: ar294500@ohio.edu